

Elizebeth Friedman Goes to Texas March 26

Elizebeth and William Friedman, working together before World War I at a think tank near Chicago, had developed many cryptographic and cryptanalytic principles that helped bring the United States into the modern cryptologic era. After the war, they worked for the Army in Washington, D.C.; Elizebeth left her job to have children, and returned to work in the late 1920s for the Coast Guard.

This was the era of Prohibition (1919-1934), in which it was illegal to import alcoholic beverages into the country, and the Coast Guard had the Herculean task of preventing smuggling by sea along the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf coasts. The Coast Guard found that many smuggling gangs, sometimes nicknamed “Rumrunners,” used encrypted communications to coordinate landing operations for their contraband, and hired Ms. Friedman to provide decrypts of them.



Elizebeth Friedman in the 1920s

Not only did she decrypt thousands of messages, she often testified in open court about the decryption process to help convict the Rumrunners. These appearances as an expert witness were heavily covered in the press, and she became quite famous. Ms. Friedman complained that in addition to jeopardizing her work, the media attention was downright annoying --- if she entered a restaurant, for example, all the waiters in the place would swarm over, vying to be her server for the meal!

In June 1930, the United States District Attorney for the Southern District of Texas requested that she testify in a court case in Galveston. Three men were accused of smuggling liquor from Belize, British Honduras (today, Belize). As the case was called by Judge J. C. Hutcheson and the attorneys for both sides stood, Ms. Friedman was surprised to find the defense lawyer was, in her words, “a very buxom young woman... [who was], horror of

horrors, shifting a wad of gum from one side of her mouth to the other as she addressed the judge.”

This was Sadie Bevalacqua, and Ms. Friedman made the assumption that she had gotten her law license on the basis of her looks rather than her learning. Ms. Bevalacqua, it is true, did not have a college degree, but she proved capable of dealing with the assistant federal attorney leading the prosecution --- and was every bit as feisty as Elizebeth Friedman herself. Ms. Friedman acknowledged when recalling the case that the defense attorney had “pertness in verbal attack.”

After some sparring between the attorneys, Judge Hutcheson agreed to allow the introduction of a number of encrypted telegrams as evidence. Ms. Friedman was sworn and took the witness chair. She was something of an elitist, and, considering the jury, feared that it was the kind of panel that would make a decision based on the color of a witness’s necktie; she determined to speak only in “monosyllabic words” and omit all technical terms.

In the cross examination, Ms. Bevalacqua asked some general questions, then, shifting her gum in her mouth, told the judge she did not understand “code” and “cipher.” Judge Hutcheson asked Ms. Friedman to explain. “Here,” she thought, “was my chance for some fun.” While she had been careful with the jury, Ms. Friedman now used as many technical terms as she could, a “barrage of polysyllabic phraseology.” When Ms. Bevalacqua said “I object,” the judge reminded her she had asked for an explanation and now had to listen to it.

Ms. Friedman recalled years later how much she enjoyed this, but Ms. Bevalacqua actually got the last laugh. She convinced the judge and jury that the district attorney had not produced enough evidence to prove that the three defendants had actually been connected to the incriminating encrypted telegrams.

Elizebeth Friedman went on to testify in other rumrunning cases. Sadie Bevalacqua had plenty of local clients and also argued cases before the Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: A short autobiographical piece by Ms. Friedman in the library of the National Cryptologic Museum.

508 CAPTION: Elizebeth Friedman, wearing a heavy coat and hat, carrying a hefty briefcase, leaving her front door.